

Rep. Baird Applauds Comment Period Extension for Admins Proposed Gorge Land Sale (March 30, 2006)

Washington, D.C. - Congressman Brian Baird today applauded the Forest Service's decision to extend the public comment period on the Secure Rural Schools land sales proposal to May 1, 2006. Congressman Baird sent a letter to Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns calling for a comment period extension and objecting to the proposal.

"I believe that the Administration's proposal establishes a very dangerous precedent which has the potential to result in the permanent loss of cherished land throughout the country," Congressman Baird wrote Secretary Johanns. "I am particularly concerned about the proposed sale of 730 acres in the Columbia River Gorge."

"I strongly urge you to withdraw the proposal to sell federal lands to finance the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self Determination Act," Congressman Baird continued. "I also strongly encourage you to extend the public comment period to provide sufficient time for those affected by these proposals to be heard, and consider holding public hearings in the areas impacted."

Agriculture Under Secretary Mark Rey announced yesterday that the public will have another month to comment on the list of forest lands the Administration has proposed selling in order to offset some of the funding for the Secure Rural Schools program.

Congressman Baird's letter to Secretary Johanns:

March 22, 2006

The Honorable Mike Johanns

Secretary

U.S. Department of Agriculture

1400 Independence Avenue, SW

Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Johanns:

I would like to express my strong objection to the Administration's proposal to sell nearly 300,000 acres of land currently owned by the Forest Service throughout the United States. I believe that the Administration's proposal establishes a very dangerous precedent which has the potential to result in the permanent loss of cherished land throughout the country.

I am particularly concerned about the proposed sale of 730 acres in the Columbia River Gorge. As you may know, the Columbia River Gorge is a breathtaking 85-mile long and 4,000 foot deep river canyon. The Gorge was carved out over millions of years by volcanic and glacial activity. It is home to the largest concentration of waterfalls in North America and a unique diversity of plant and animal life, including over 800 species of wildflowers, 16 of which exist nowhere else in the world. The Columbia River Gorge was designated a National Scenic Area by Congress in 1986 to protect and provide for the enhancement of its scenic, cultural, recreational and natural resources.

The parcels of land proposed for sale by the Administration explicitly exclude land within National Wilderness Preservation System, National Wild and Scenic Rivers System, National Trails System, National Recreation Areas, National Monuments, National Historic Sites, and National Preserves. The legislative proposal to Congress also excludes land from "similar congressionally designated area[s]." I respectfully request an explanation as to why the Administration decided not to explicitly exclude National Scenic Areas from the proposal and why National Scenic Areas are not considered a "similar congressionally designated area." I strongly believe that lands within a National Scenic Area are no less worthy of preservation than lands within the areas excluded from the proposal and strongly urge the Administration to reconsider the inclusion of National Scenic Areas.

Even if the Administration decides to proceed with the sale of land within National Scenic Areas, I want to express my serious concerns about many of the parcels proposed for sale in the Columbia River Gorge. For example, two of the parcels up for sale in the Columbia River Gorge are thought to serve as habitat for spotted owl. Two other large tracts are above a significant Native American cultural site. Other tracts are in areas purposefully under-developed to maintain recreational opportunities and the scenic nature of the site. I am convinced that the sale of these, and other, parcels within the Columbia River Gorge will be a devastating loss to Southwest Washington.

According to the Administration, the land sales are being offered to offset the cost of the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self Determination Act. I strongly support this bipartisan program. I voted for the original bill five years ago and am a cosponsor of the bill reauthorizing the program for another seven years. The program provides important funds for schools in rural communities and facilitates cooperative efforts through the Resource Advisory Council process. However, the Administration's estimate of the values of the land sales, which is significantly higher than the estimate reached by the Congressional Budget Office, would not cover the full cost of the very program the sales claim to be supporting. The Secure Rural Schools and Community Self Determination Act reauthorization pending in Congress is for

\$3 billion over seven years. The Administration will, given the best case estimate, not even achieve a third of this cost with the land sales.

I firmly believe that the sale of public land is a misguided way to finance government programs, even important government programs such as the Secure Rural Schools program. The sale of land to raise government revenue is simply unsustainable. Furthermore, as the co-chair of the National Parks Caucus and as a Member of Congress who has spent years advocating for the protection of our natural resources, I have grave concerns about the permanent and potentially irreversible - loss of our nation's natural treasures.

It is also clear that the Administration's proposal has been rushed and has not been subject to proper consideration by the public. If the Administration decides to continue with this misguided proposal to sell federal land, I would strongly encourage you to extend the comment period and hold public hearings in the areas affected by the proposal, including Southwest Washington. Hearings will present an opportunity for the public to raise questions or concerns about the proposal in general, as well as raise issues that are specific to the land parcels listed.

I strongly urge you to withdraw the proposal to sell federal lands to finance the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self Determination Act. I also strongly encourage you to extend the public comment period to provide sufficient time for those affected by these proposals to be heard, and consider holding public hearings in the areas impacted. I would also hope that this letter will be considered as a public comment on the proposal and included in the record.

Thank you for your consideration of my requests. If you have any questions or need any additional information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Brian Baird

Member of Congress

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